

The Last Emperor

Chapter 24 – The Sleeper

“There was a lot of wealth though, which seemed to be growing with each passing year. Of course everyone was curious, but no one really knew how Kahan acquired its legendary wealth. Zin had already presented Muzzie with several chests full of gold for his imperial treasury.”



Galla Sinsa-Ennaria had attempted to appeal the decision, until it was obvious Muzzie considered it to be an honour, rather than a punishment. She was to be the Imperial Governor of Aarabash and the Palace Bizzi had refurbished was to be her Official Residence.

“You’ll hardly be cut off.” Runa had mentioned. “Aarabash is connected to the Void Gate every few days to let the food waggons through to the stockade.”

Aarabash was far from being put in prison, or placed in exile, but Galla couldn’t help feeling she was being removed from being one of the eight, one of the sacred advisers. Why though ? She was a bit disrespectful at times, but that was just her style, everyone knew that. After a private meeting with Muzzie over a meal one evening, Galla thought she’d over thought it all, or as Muzzie had put it....

“You think the backside out of everything.” Muzzie had said. “I need someone I can trust in Aarabash. If the food stops flowing my army will break apart. You can use the Void Gate as you please and I know you’ve had a few ideas for a Guild of Healers. Do it.....Set up the guild in the centre of Aarabash. You’ll have my full support. Bring in gifted healers from across the rifts and maybe some from other worlds. The army will need all the healers you can train.”

The Guild of Sorcerers in the City of the Lost God, had admitted a tiny number of particularly skilful healers. It was considered a side discipline though, nothing more. For a very long time, Galla had thought about starting a Guild of Healers. Not for sorcerers dabbling in healing, but a guild just for the healing arts. Muzzie’s words had changed a posting in an uninspiring city, into a fabulous opportunity. She was currently looking over her new home, the Official Residence.

“Wow, this place is huge.” Said Maya. “I seem to sleep in the waggon most nights.....Can I move in here ?”

They were stood in the main entrance hall and on this occasion, Maya hadn’t just turned up, she’d actually been invited. The palace looked wonderful, but then again, it had every right to look wonderful. Bizzi had spent five times as much on the place than Muzzie had approved. The chest of gold left as a source of funds for the garrison, had been just about emptied. In truth, everyone knew Belso was the problem and he was currently in a cell, awaiting her decision on his fate.

“You can have an entire wing if you like.” Said Galla. “Just make sure someone good looks in on Caspian every day. I don’t know how he survived that wound, but we have to make sure he stays alive.”

“Can I choose a room now ?” Asked Maya. “I feel grubby sleeping in the waggon and my clothes get crumpled.”

“Ahh, you’re growing up, child.....It’ll be boys next.” Said Galla.

Maya blushed, not an easy thing for a Dredger with dark yellow skin. The girl had to be close to puberty and maybe.....She might have started noticing boys already. That was it of course, when her sane and calm life was over.

“Come on then, there are some nice rooms near mine....Or so I’m told.” Said Galla.

Galla had visited the palace twice while Bizzi was there and one of the servants had scribbled a rough floor plan on a piece paper. Galla had thought of bringing one of the servants with her, but wanted to be able to see her new home in privacy. The map wasn’t too bad.....All they had to do was go up the central staircase.....

“I know Belso is in trouble.....But this hallway is beautiful.” Said Maya.

“It is, but Belso spent imperial gold on a one for you, one for me, basis.” Said Galla.

There had been extravagant living too and bribes for certain local officials. The methods Belso used to empty the imperial chest of gold were varied and still being examined. Galla had been told it might take years to discover every fraudulently use of the imperial purse. The normal punishment for such things was to lose his head to the axe.

“Please.....Please.....Can I see your room ?” Pleaded Maya.

“You can, but I like my privacy, in all things.” Said Galla. “No describing my bedchamber to all of your friends. Do I have your promise ? I could have you jailed if you break it.”

“I promise.....I don’t want you throwing me out.” Said Maya. “This place is.....Wonderful.”

Galla’s bedchamber had been set up as per her instructions and her rather humble bed, looked even more humble against the opulent décor. The dressing table and chairs had been gilded, covered in fine layers of gold. Bizzi should never had approved that, but it was Muzzie’s fault. He’d been so worried about Bizzi being so pedantic that he’d achieve nothing. It had been Muzzie’s orders to let Belso have the final say with suppliers. All Muzzie’s fault, but no sensible person ever tells their emperor it was all their fault.

“This is.....Like an extra special palace, inside the palace.” Said Maya.

“That is the problem.....Bizzi used this room and far too much was spent on it.” Said Galla.

“Will you really execute poor Belso ?” Asked Maya.

“If I tell you.....Keep the secret or the executioner may remove your head.” Said Galla.

“I will.....I’m not a child anymore.” Said Maya.

“Muzzie told Bizzi to trust Belso, so no blame can be given to Bizzi.” Said Galla. “As for Belso.....He should have died when Aeony knocked him from the city walls of Tandalla. It could be said he’s been living on borrowed time.”

“Oh, are you going to have him killed ?” Asked Maya.

Galla had spent a sleepless night or two, over that question and she still wasn’t sure if she’d decided on the right way to handle it.

“I could have him executed.” Said Galla. “It’s what the army are expecting. I’m not though.....And I’m not going to have him thrown in a cell forever. I intend to threaten Belso Gurd with everything nasty I can think of, and think up a few new things to scare him with. I will then demote him to the lowest rank in the army. I will then make him the lowest of the low in the garrison of Aarabash. He’ll earn just about enough to survive and.....He’ll damn well have to be thankful for that.”

“But he’ll be alive.” Said Maya.

“Yes, child.....He’ll be alive.” Said Galla. “Come on, there are six or seven nice rooms near mine. I’m certain you’ll love one of them.”

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Vella had worried about them being guests of honour at the festivities for the return of Zin Thriaxer, lawful ruler of Kahan. There were rumours that much of the fabulous wealth of the tiny nation had been acquired by unorthodox means. Banditry of course, though that was found everywhere. As Kahan weren’t at war with neighbouring nations, they probably weren’t involved in large scale cross

border raids. There was a lot of wealth though, which seemed to be growing with each passing year. Of course everyone was curious, but no one really knew how Kahan acquired its legendary wealth. Zin had already presented Muzzie with several chests full of gold for his imperial treasury.

“How are you, Caspian ?” Asked Zin. “I heard about your combat with the huge Ezzagory of the demon city. I’m told your victory was.....Magnificent.”

“Luck my friend.....And a good blade.” Said Caspian. “My wound still stops me walking too far but sat here.....Lots of good food and wonderful company. I’m fine and enjoying myself.”

“We’re both honoured to be here.” Added Vella.

“Ahhh, the jugglers are warming up.” Said Zin. “Newly arrived from Tandalla, thanks to that wonderful gateway of yours. I’m told they’re very skilful.”

In the King’s hall, drinking the King’s wine and some of the best food to be found on any of the rifts. It was wonderful, but Muzzie should have been there. He was at Mount Erran, working with the Dredgers to deface one of the most holy places in existence. Luckily, Zin appeared to view getting Caspian and her as guests as a huge compliment. Her husband was after all, the hero of the hour, the killer of Casto Ganaan, Ezzagory of Segin-Unadaris. They were honoured guests and if the locals did become awkward ? A good part of Muzzie’s army were still there, enjoying the hospitality of a grateful ruler of Kahan.

“Oh, juggling swords.....That looks very dangerous.” Said Zin.

“We saw them in Tandalla.” Said Vella. “They juggle just about anything, even volunteers from the audience.”

There had been an accident while performing in Tandalla. One of the dozen or so members of the jugglers had been skewered while juggling a long, pointed staff. Vella was unsure if they’d died from the wound. Not that she was about to mention it. Hearing about it might spoil the enjoyment of the performance for the King of Kahan.

“Wow, that was close.....Almost took his own arm off.” Said Zin.

“They juggled a few infants in Tandalla.” Said Caspian. “Im not sure if they were their children.”

“Amazing.....Sadly all the children are in bed.” Said Zin.

Would the leaders of the City of the Lost God have loved the idea of infant juggling ? Sadly, Vella thought their reaction would have been similar to Zin’s. She might have been just as enthusiastic, if she hadn’t witnessed the accident in Tandalla. All the jugglers were about the same height and size and dressed in the same clothing, almost a uniform. Lose the occasional member to a tragic accident and no one would realise.

“Could we have volunteers from the audience ? We will be gentle.” Someone yelled.

No infants and the servants must have been warned; they were suddenly absent from the King’s hall. Not that Zin seemed inclined to inflict the indignity of being juggled on his domestic staff. He began to volunteer his ministers for the treat. Regardless of age, gender and general physical condition, Zin chose about seven members of his government. All of them in their best clothes and all of them looking far from happy at being volunteered.

“Go on then.....Show me how high you can juggle them.” Yelled Zin.

“Ahhh, I think the chap in the red trousers is trying to escape.” Said Caspian.

“No.....The jugglers have him.” Said Zin.

The King wanted them juggled high and Kings tended to get what they asked for. Some of his ministers complained, but most didn’t. Up they went and the jugglers had lied, they were far from gentle. They juggled the members of the Kahan government on their feet, effectively kicking them high up into the air. The hall was full of invited dignitaries and local business people. Vella was

already beginning to recognise a few faces. Governments are never that popular anywhere and Kahan was no exception. The higher the ministers were bounced, the more the audience applauded and demanded more.

“Higher.....Higher.” Everyone yelled.

The jugglers gave a huge bow to the King when it was over. Those they’d juggled didn’t bow, most didn’t even smile. They limped off.....All except the man in the red trousers.

“Him again.....He looks to be hurt.” Said Vella.

“It’s Denae, my minister of war.” Said Zin. “No one likes him.....He’s just trying to get attention.”

A large hybrid who didn’t look that young, or that well; though Vella knew appearances on the rifts could often be deceptive. Denae wasn’t going anywhere on his own feet. After a brief discussion, the jugglers carried away the minister for war. That too, was applauded by the audience.

“You were right about the jugglers.....Wonderful.” Said Zin.

Caspian looked at her and they both rolled their eyes and sort of shrugged. All too easy to look down on the people of Kahan, tucked away on the hot, sandy and very dry edge of the second rift. In truth, they’d been to a banquet at the Sorcerers Guild in the City of the Lost God. An excellent banquet where the audience had been delighted by an after dinner act. That had been a knife thrower and the accident had left a particularly unpopular necromancer with just one ear. Then too, the audience had cheered for quite some time.

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The Void Gate required so much aiming for so many different reasons. Their food needing a gateway to Aarabash, while much of the army needed to go back and forth from Kahan. Then there was Galla taking him up on his offer to visit healers in some very out of the way places. Dignitaries too, from the cities he’d already added to the new empire. Even the Hive Mother had sent a message about bringing a delegation to see Muzzie. The great and good of Segin-Unadaris would want something from him, though he had no idea what. It would grow, it would get worse.....Setting destinations on the Void Gate was in danger of filling hours of every day. He had tried to teach Faal how to set the destinations on the gate, but it only seemed to obey him.

Weland Raag had told Muzzie where to find the Void Gate and given him instruction on how to activate it. Sadly, Weland had given up the fight to keep his soul in Gorshan. After talking to Muzzie, his essence had drifted off to wherever human souls eventually went to. That left Muzzie with one sensible option, though his choice of gate controllers wouldn’t please everyone, even them.....It started with finding Bird, who as usual now, was in Runa’s tent.

“I need to talk to Bird.” Said Muzzie. “Don’t leave, Runa.....This involves you too.”

Aeony was with him and she already knew his plan. It wasn’t much of a plan, though he needed to do something before he became a full time gate opener. There had been nothing about that in the destiny he’d been, sort of, promised.

“Why, Muzzie ? What have I done ?” Asked Runa.

“He’ll give you the speech about needing someone he can trust.” Said Aeony. “I had the speech.....I’m involved in it too.”

“I do need people I can trust.” Said Muzzie. “And for one reason or another, I picked both of you.”

“She’s sleeping with you. How did I get lucky ?” Asked Runa.

“I knew your father; he was a good and honourable man. I’m sure he raised a good and honourable daughter.”

Runa was a fighter, but Muzzie still hugged her back when she hugged him.

“Fine.....What have I been picked for ?” Asked Runa.

"Oh, you'll love this." Said Aeony.

"It isn't anything bad.....I need both of you to know how to aim the Void Gate." Said Muzzie.

"Could be useful.....How do I learn that ?" Asked Runa.

"First, I need Bird.....Is he awake ?" Asked Muzzie.

Bird was perched on top of Runa's armour, which she'd leant against a corner of the tent. He looked to be very asleep, not even reacting when Muzzie stroked his tummy. His feathers seemed to be drab at night, though that might have been the dull yellow light from the oil lamp.

"Is he alright ?" Asked Aeony.

"It is pretty late at night, Aeony." Said Runa. "Two live Nesh bugs and a few minutes to wake up.....And he'll be as annoying as ever."

It was nice to know that Bird woke up feeling like shit. The damn thing was so perky most of the time. Muzzie took a wriggling Nesh bug from Runa and pushed it against Bird's beak. His eyes just about opened, as he chewed up the bug and swallowed it. Bird looked almost properly awake, as he munched on the second bug.

"When you're ready, Bird." Said Muzzie. "I need to talk to her, the one who looks through your eyes. I'm sure you know who I mean."

Bird nodded his tired looking head. He really did look like death warmed up.

"Is he alright, Runa ?" Asked Muzzie. "I know it's late, but crap.....He looks like death warmed up a little."

"He's old, Muzzie." Said Runa. "Galla told me her pet saw the army of Xanash the seventh march out to battle. She thinks he wasn't young then. Give him time to wake up."

"I still think he'll outlive us all." Said Aeony.

Muzzie watched as Bird's feathers regained their colour. He moved about, hopping from one foot to another. The creature made a chuntering sound, but didn't speak. It was closer to half an hour than a few minutes, when Bird finally said a few words.

"The Lady will speak to you."

Galla had already told him that the Lady couldn't help them once his army were outside the walls of Quron. It seemed there were rules of the balance that even the Silver Lady had to obey. Once the army attacked Quron, they would be on their own. When the voice came it was like Bird's voice, mixed with something else. Bird tended to squawk out his words, whereas the Lady spoke in proper sentences.

"Muzzie, I am pleased you called for me." Said the Lady. "If I can help, I will....Though remember my help ends at the gates of Quron."

"I have a small problem that could become a large problem." Said Muzzie. "The ghost of Weland Raag told me of the Void Gate, but his spirit no longer walks the land of the living. Only I can aim the gate where it is needed. If it's possible, I need others to be able to set the destination of the gate."

"That I can change very easily, though there will be a little pain." Said the Lady. "Nothing worthwhile ever comes without some pain..... Are you ready Mussaneth Osranetherer ?"

He wasn't at all proud of it, but he had hoped the pain might be for Aeony and Runa. The Silver Lady probably had a notion of a little pain, which others might well think of as agony.

"I am ready."

"Hold up the arm your sword arm."

The pain was somewhere between the field surgery he'd once had for an arrow in his side; and being killed by a huge Shelzak demon and being brought back from the dead. The return to the world of the living had caused more pain than the Shelzak. It was bad; a long, long way from being anything

any sane person would call a little pain. Muzzie yelled and yelled again when he saw the red throbbing lump on the back of his hand.

"Shit.....That really hurt." He muttered.

"Don't be a child, Muzzie.....It will heal very quickly." Said the Lady. "Do you remember the phrase Wēland Raag gave you to activate the Void Gate ?"

"Yes, I do."

"Touch the person you want to use the gate, with your sword hand." Said the Lady. "Say the name you know them by and then say the activation phrase again. They will then have full control over the gate."

"Will it cause us pain ?" Asked Runa.

"Just a little.....To think; you are the weak and mewling children who want to rule the rifts."

Bird was flapping about and it was obvious that the Lady was no longer with them.

"I think you upset her." Said Aeony.

"Me !.....I'm sure we both wanted to know." Said Runa.

"Don't worry; I'm sure it's just the way the Lady communicates." Said Muzzie. "It can't be avoided though.....Who wants to go first ?"

"Me.....Let's get it over with." Said Runa.

Muzzie gripped Runa's arm and gave her full name, before saying the phrase Wēland had given him to activate the gate. Runa's face told him she'd suffered some pain, but it hadn't been that bad.

Runa now had a throbbing lump on the back of her sword hand.

"Not good.....But not that much pain." Said Runa.

Like all dark angels, Muzzie knew Aeony was good at handling pain. He also knew she quickly became angry at those causing her pain. She was quite capable of breaking off his arm and beating him to death with the bloody end.

"Are you ready ?" He asked her.

"I think so." Said Aeony.

"Remember it's me and keep calm if it hurts."

"Just do it, Muzzie.....Get it done."

It hurt her, he saw her eyes darken and the smell of angry dark angel hit his senses. Muzzie wanted to run away and carry Aeony off to bed, both at the same time. His lover leant forward and rubbed her cheek against his. She then held up her hand, which now had a large purple lump behind her clawed fingers.

"That was.....Unpleasant." Said Aeony. "I suppose we should make sure it worked."

"It will work.....The Lady never gets that kind of thing wrong." Said LLud.

LLud Narren, looking fairly solid, yet still able to walk through the tent wall. It was strange that Muzzie now accepted that the long dead magician was on his side, but still didn't quite trust him.

LLud always struck him as someone who'd sell his own grandmother, if the price was right.

"LLud, I owe you thanks for helping Caspian." Said Muzzie.

"Just something I found and thought might be useful." Said LLud. "I'm hoping you might be able to help me when the sleeper is awake. Careful how you wake them though, take it slowly. I'd actually go so far as to say, you need to be extremely careful about how you wake them."

"So.....You know who sleeps in the depths of Mount Erran ?" Asked Runa.

"I do and.....So should you by now."

"Stop playing games, LLud." Said Aeony. "Just tell us. Then we'll know why we have to be so careful."

"It's one of the nine divines." Squawked Bird.

It was either so obvious a bird knew, or the Lady had decided to give them the information. Muzzie was sure it was right; it was the only thing that made any sense. LLud actually bowed slightly in the direction of Galla's pet.

"Which of the nine, LLud?" Asked Muzzie. "You might as well tell us."

"You'll know soon enough." Said LLud. "Despite being more corporeal, I'm still not fully back in the world of the living. The creatures of the dark hunt me, knowing I'm neither one thing nor the other, neither dead nor fully alive. It scares me Muzzie.....Please ask the divine one to help me."

"Always self-interest with this one." Muttered Runa.

"Caspian only lives because LLud gave him Mozzrik's blade." Said Muzzie. "If the divine one will listen and I'm not killed awakening it.....I will ask them to help."

LLud Narren bowed slightly again towards Bird, before slowly vanishing.

"I just hope it's not Sevril-Narge, the bug goddess." Said Aeony.

"She's dead.....Boiled away into the void millennia ago." Said Runa.

"Half of them are supposed to have died." Said Muzzie. "Doesn't seem to stop them turning up every few centuries, or so."

"Imagine if it's Monazin-Conosin." Said Runa. "There are stories of him destroying entire worlds."

"Just what we don't need." Muttered Muzzie. "An angry, vengeful God."

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General Dhūlen had been told to have a thousand warriors ready and provisioned an hour after full light came to the rifts for another day. Provisioned for several days and carrying enough tents and bedding for everyone to have shelter at night. The time had arrived, Muzzie was about to anger the Gods. He was going to shatter the side of the holy mountain.

"We need the Void Gate aimed at the base of Mount Erran." Said Muzzie.

Dhūlen stood and waited near the controls, assuming Muzzie would set the gate's destination. Of course he'd heard that Aeony and Runa could now operate the gate, but thought that was it, just two members of the eight who could set the gate to anywhere they chose. When Muzzie didn't move, Dhūlen had an inkling of what was going on.

"I need those I trust to be able to set the gate." Said Muzzie. "There is a little pain and your arm will be numb for a few hours. There are no other ill effects. Would you like to be able to operate the Void Gate?"

"Yes, that would be useful. I'll be able to quickly send reinforcements where they're needed."

"Can I fully trust you General?" Asked Muzzie. "Have I your complete loyalty?"

"Of course, why do you ask?" Asked Dhūlen.

It was from when he'd been hungrier and far more ambitious. Dhūlen knew there were a few still alive who knew he'd nearly betrayed the emperor he'd then served. It had to be that, someone must have mentioned it to Muzzie. Some had thought he was capable of becoming emperor himself, that he'd found a Dhūlen dynasty. In the end though, when it had really mattered, he'd remained loyal to the emperor.

"I'm not saying who, but someone who recommended you to me, mentioned something from your past. It seems you almost set yourself up as emperor, a very, very long time ago. Is that true?"

"It is true, Muzzie.....I was tempted, but remained loyal." Said Dhūlen

"That is what I was told, but I still need to ask.....Do I have your total loyalty?"

"Yes, you do."

"Good.....Now my General, hold up your sword arm." Said Muzzie.

It hurt a lot; he almost collapsed from the pain. His mind was confused for a few seconds and he felt so weak. When Muzzie asked him to set the gate, Dhūlen doubted that he'd be able to do it. It was as if his mind was full of fog.

"I'll tell you how to do it.....There's not much to remember, it almost sets itself." Said Muzzie.

Despite a sore arm and a giddy feeling, Dhūlen set the gate. He pressed the right places on the pedestal and uttered the right words. To his astonishment, the glowing column appeared. The gate was ready and the warriors were collecting their things together to step through.

"Well done.....One last thing." Said Muzzie. "We test it, to make sure it's not set to take everyone into the void, or worse.....Seren's Edge."

"Yes, I seem to remember us testing it when it was aimed at Tandalla." Said Dhūlen.

It seemed so long ago since they'd walked into the glowing column of light and come out a few miles from the gates of Tandalla. This time they came out in front of the sheer face of the highest mountain on the rifts. It felt quite cold after the desert conditions near the Void Gate, but nothing the army couldn't cope with. The temperature was just a little chilly, rather than the deadly freezing temperatures up at the summit.

"I am amazed I succeeded." Said Dhūlen. "I was still feeling a bit dazed.... Like having fog in my head."

"If you can do it with a bad case of brain fog, you'll be fine." Said Muzzie. "Now.....We return and bring the fighters through. We may need them; we're on the Pilgrim Trail. Once a safe route for entire families, but lately.....There are some unpleasant stories about missing pilgrims."

"Bandits probably.....Who else would prey on harmless pilgrims." Said Dhūlen. "If they try to attack our warriors, they'll be in for a nasty surprise."

Dhūlen had heard about bodies being dismembered, even livestock being mutilated. He was no fonder of travellers' tales than Faal and refused to pass on anything he hadn't seen with his own eyes. Some talked of chaos creatures walking in the places that had once been safe. Some even openly accused the dark angels in the City of the Lost God. The truth was probably as mundane as a band of renegade hybrid fighters from Quron. A gang of crazy outcasts, deemed too extreme for even Quron to tolerate. Not that General Dhūlen was unduly concerned. As he stepped back through the gate and walked towards the army he commanded, he was calm. He was confident the fighters all around him could cope with anything.

"Stop sitting on your backsides." Yelled Dhūlen. "Follow me.....There's work to be done."

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Faal had decided that the great and powerful Gods, sometimes enjoyed being annoying for the sake of it. He wasn't keen on Nethra and suspected she wasn't fond of his company. Yet they kept running into one another. There she was, within shouting distance, waiting for an opportunity to use the gate to Mount Erran.

"A good day for it." Faal yelled.

"Indeed it is." Nethra shouted back.

Faal liked Maya, but she too, had the habit of being everywhere, usually without an invite. He liked the Dredger youngster, but not when he was riding a beast he wasn't quite sure, wasn't going to throw him and stomp on him afterwards. Shuud usually had a nice docile temperament, but the four legged beast beneath him, wasn't a Shuud.

"Nice beast.....What is it?" Asked Maya.

"The crook who sold it to me, said it was a Shuud." Said Faal.

"That.....is no Shuud."

"I know."

The problem was having only three names on the rifts, for what were probably a thousand different species of four legged creatures. Wild or domesticated, there were only the three names. Anything large, aggressive, powerful and smelly, tended to be called a Jangar. Smaller creatures with soft fur and, usually, a more friendly temperament, were called Shuud. Anything smaller that scampered about the rifts, tended to be called a Rock Cropper. There were the six and eight legged carrion feeders, but they were something completely different. Faal had come to the conclusion that the Shuud he'd bought, had a lot of Jangar in its ancestry.

"What is it then?" Asked Maya.

"It's.....Unpredictable, Maya.....So don't annoy it."

Faal didn't want to lose his spot in the line for the Void Gate, and he wasn't keen on any nonessential riding about on his 'not quite a Shuud'. Maya had him, all hers to question until they were at the base of Mount Erran.

"I was wondering.....Will we need to attack every city on the rifts?" Asked Maya. "There must be a huge number of them. Then there are all the large towns."

It was a common misconception, even some of the officers in the army thought they'd go on an almost permanent campaign, attacking every village and small trading post like Seren's Edge. As if that was even possible.....The best trained army loses a few warriors at each battle. Eventually the emperor would have no army left to fight his enemies.

"No, Maya.....And you can tell anyone I said that won't happen." Said Faal. "There are more battles ahead, but taking Quron is the key to everything. It has to be bloody, with lots of destruction and carnage. Leave Quron as a ruin and no one will oppose our emperor."

"No one?" Asked Maya.

"No one.....Muzzie will be crowned in Leng and then set up his imperial palace somewhere on the rifts. There might be the occasional city that rebels, but that will be a rare occurrence. Muzzie needs to be brutal when it matters, but enjoy the peace afterwards. I think he'll be a very good emperor."

Faal was actually enjoying talking to the young apothecary. It took his mind off the occasional strange movement of the beast he was riding and it was nice to have an attentive audience.

"Where will Muzzie have his imperial palace?" Asked Maya.

"Not just a palace, the imperial army will be based there too." Said Faal. "No one really knows, the choice is Muzzie's. Some say it'll be in Annill, but personally.....I think our emperor will go home. I can see him having his base in the City of the Lost God."

"Yes, he's always talking about that city." Said Maya.

"It was his home for a very long time." Said Faal. "Ahhh.....Good.....We're in the next group to go through the gate. Move away a little Maya.....Just in case my, 'not quite a Shuud', becomes temperamental."

It didn't, the beast never put a hoof in the wrong place. It made some very strange noises for a Shuud and seemed to worry a group of archers, but Faal never felt in danger of being thrown. Maya re-joined him, which was a wonderful excuse to ride his beast at walking pace. Faal liked his mount and being up above the heads of most in the army. Not quite Muzzie being carried on his throne, but it felt pretty good. Of course, the God of embarrassing coincidences sent them towards Nethra.

"Look, I can see Nethra near the camp." Said Maya.

"Yes.....Wonderful." Said Faal.

While trying to avoid the bulk of the thousand fighters sent to guard the temporary camp, Faal had unintentionally steered them towards Nethra. Muzzie was there too and Dhūlen. It was a good vantage point to get a good view on Mount Erran, which was why Faal had headed that way.

“Faal.....What by the nine divines, are you riding ?” Asked Dhūlen.

“Don’t let him convince you it’s a Shuud.” Said Muzzie.

“Looks like a hybrid.” Said Nethra. “A tiny bit of Shuud and a massive amount of Jangar.”

There were quite a few other comments on his mount, none of them pleasant or polite. Faal smiled at each remark, until his jaws began to ache. He was getting used to his new beast though and his beast was getting used to him. His strange kind of Shuud was a comfortable ride and long distances would no longer mean aching legs.

“You have a good strong looking beast there, Faal.” Said Muzzie. “A male creature by the look of it. Have you given him a name yet ?”

Faal hadn’t decided on a name, because up until that moment, there was a chance his new beast might have ended up being sold very cheaply or be destined for the pot. But, if Muzzie liked the look of the creature.....

“Mikan.....A good strong name for a good strong beast.” Said Faal.

“The legendary mount of Xeod, a full blooded demon emperor from.....” Said Nethra.

“Long before the Xanash line came along.” Said Dhūlen. “A very good choice of name.”

Mounts tend to feel the emotions of those riding them. Faal was feeling confident and Mikan moved smoothly over the uneven ground. When Muzzie stopped on the edge of the vast area of rubble in front of Mount Erran. Faal dismounted and stood near the emperor. Everyone was looking up at the famous sheer north face of the holy mountain.

“My mother said we will anger all the Gods.” Said Maya.

Faal had forgotten Maya was there, she was good at becoming almost invisible among the adults.

Muzzie towered over the child, making her even more difficult to see.

“Your mother may be right, but I’ll tell you a secret.” Said Muzzie. “A very wise and very dead human cleric.....Told me there is a door in the side of the mountain. A door just a few feet under the wall of rock we’re looking at. If I upset the Gods.....Well, they will have to put up with it. I intend to use that door and wake the sleeper.”

“Who is the sleeper ?” Asked Maya.

“I’ll take you in there with me, Maya.” Said Muzzie. “Right inside the mountain we’ll go and you’ll know who the sleeper is, when I finally know.”

Dhūlen must have been sending out runners. One breathless young warrior arrived to say that Bizzi’s Dredgers were ready. Faal had offered to help, but Muzzie had been confident that the spells granted to him by the Hand of Arcadis; were more than capable of shattering the north face of Mount Erran.

“The army are well back from us.....But we could do with a shield over the top of us, to stop annoying flying rubble.” Said Muzzie. “How about it, Faal ? Can you cover us with something solid and appropriate ?”

“I can indeed.” Said Faal.

A simple spell, though Faal did do it by adding layers of spells over one another. Even the largest and heaviest piece of rubble, wasn’t going to hurt anyone.

“Done.....We’re now safe from flying rocks.” Said Faal.

“Perhaps Maya should move back with the army ?” Asked Dhūlen.

“No.....I promised that I’ll take her into the holy mountain.” Said Muzzie.

After that it was all about Muzzie and the mummified hand tucked inside his shirt. Faal could feel the waves of pure chaos, as Muzzie began to build a truly staggering spell. The Gods might have used more powerful magic, but Faal doubted if any mortal had ever been brave enough. History spoke of Arcadis as a kind and fairly humble magician. The power was coming from somewhere and Faal doubted if it was the dead shade of the humble magician. Maybe the Hand had been waiting, patiently drifting through the millennia, waiting to be claimed by Muzzie.

“I feel it.....As though the Ancient Ones have returned to the rifts.” Said Faal.

“So much chaos energy.....The Gods will tremble, Muzzie.” Said Nethra.

Faal had seen many things, but even he hadn't seen a sky full of purple chaos. Muzzie didn't seem to aim it, but his colossal spell hit the entire side of Mount Erran. Some of the outer surface became tiny fragments of stone and pebbles. But for the shield Faal had put in place, there would have been a lot of cuts and bruises. The main force of all the chaos power, cracked open the north face of the holy mountain.

Billions upon billions of tons of rock, broke up and fell from the mountain. Faal wanted to shout that Muzzie's spell was working, but no one would hear him over the noise of Mount Erran losing its entire north face. As the pieces of rock fell, the noise was even louder. There was dust too, a wall of it sweeping across the rift. The fighters were probably coughing on it, but again, the only sound to be heard, was the noise of destruction. Eventually, even that much destruction has to end. Everywhere Faal looked, was covered in rubble. There had been a nice looking wood, with early blooming flowers. Now there was just rubble with a deep covering of rock dust. Dhūlen was the closest to the destruction, peering at the mountain.

“So much dust and debris.” Said Dhūlen. “I can't see a door though, or anything that even resembles a door.”

Faal had brought a few things, including a very expensive magnifier. He retrieved it from the saddle pack on his Shuud. He leant on the creature to steady the lensed devise.

“Easy Mikan.....Keep still.” Faal Muttered.

It was there, a door that looked large enough for ten men to enter, walking side by side. There was some rubble in front of it, but not enough to bother a few energetic Dredgers.

“I see it, I see the door.” Faal shouted. “We'll need to clear some rubble.....But I can see the door.”

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